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The Elusive Truffle: Travels In Search Of The Legendary Food Of France

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Mirabel Osler writes regularly for the garden magazine *Hortus* and is the author of *A Gentle Plea for Chaos, The Garden Wall, The Garden Bench, In the Eye of the Garden, The Secret Gardens of France* and *A Breath From Elsewhere*.

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Also by Mirabel Osler

A GENTLE PLEA FOR CHAOS
THE GARDEN BENCH
THE GARDEN WALL
THE SECRET GARDENS OF FRANCE
IN THE EYE OF THE GARDEN
A BREATH FROM ELSEWHERE

THE ELUSIVE TRUFFLE

Travels In Search of the Legendary Food of France

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Illustrations by

SIMON DORRELL

Recipes interpreted by SHAUN HILL

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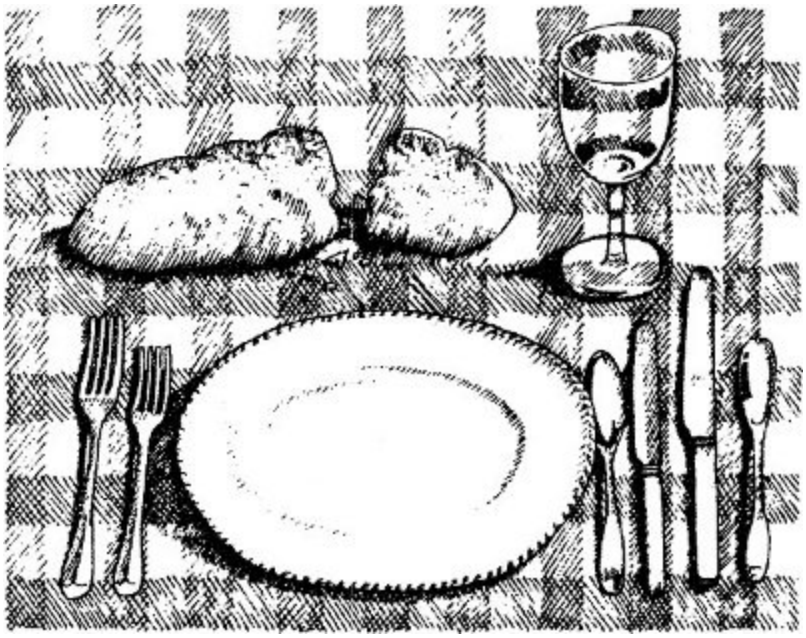

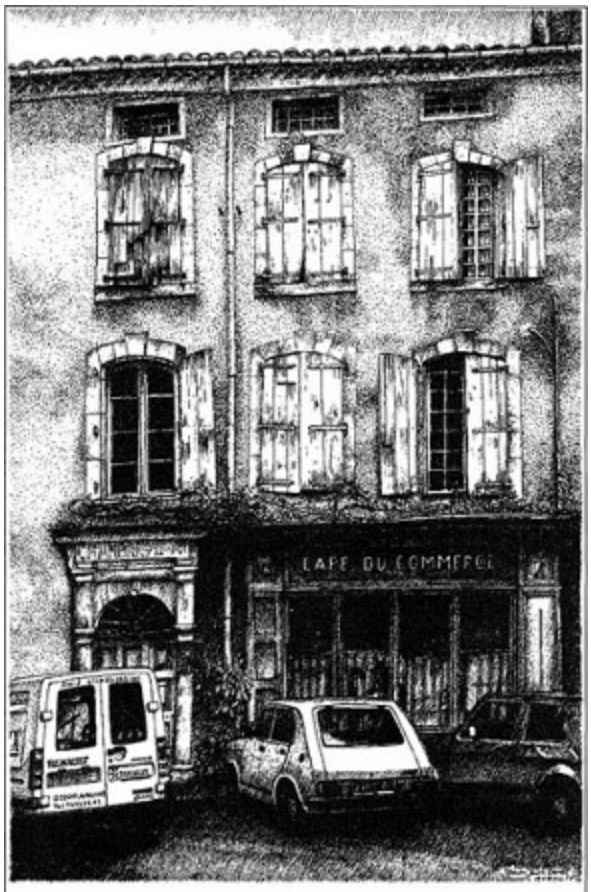
CAFE DU COMMERCE

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Notes About the Recipes

BECAUSE COOKING IS AN IMPRECISE ART, it's almost impossible for weights and measures or oven temperatures to be set in stone. I've included a few recipes at the end of each chapter, more or less as they were given to me, but skilfully adapted by Shaun Hill for those of you who would like to try them. Accuracy doesn't come into it but improvisation, gastronomic intuition and your sense of smell, feel and taste do. The weather or time of year, or the age and freshness of ingredients may be critical to whether a recipe works or not, but even so no dish turns out the same every time, despite the fact that the ingredients are identical. Some of the recipes are simple, others sound wildly unattainable. Using basil because you can't get your hands on dill may change the mood of the course but will not detract from the result.

Shaun Hill told me to distrust all recipes, and in particular those given to me by chefs! Chefs cook from a totally different base from that used in a domestic kitchen. A chef, before he or she starts, will have little bowls – the *mise en place* of chopped shallots, herbs, mushrooms, etc, in place. He scoops up handfuls of ingredients for each dish he cooks, never weighing or measuring a thing, whether it's butter, chopped ginger, wine or cream.

Chapter I

THE ORIGIN OF THE QUEST

Chartreuse

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The Origin of the Quest

AMONG THE AUTUMN CROCUS sprinkling the upland meadows of the Chartreuse, Honorine, Clotilde's grandmother, grazed her three cows. By the time the first bitter winds from the east reached the pasture, and before the snow weighed down the branches of the chestnuts, Honorine would bring the cattle down to the valley. The sound of their bells, each chime at variance with the other, is one of Clotilde's first memories. More than sixty years ago, accompanying her grandmother, she would loiter among the leaves searching for *girolles* or for hazelnuts within her reach. That was before she was old enough to be put to work: to pump water and scrub the pails; to feed chickens and clean out the rabbits; it was before she was responsible for helping her mother make cheese from a mixture of goats' and cows' milk, or was able to handle the small knife used for preparing vegetables in the kitchen.

To find this area you must forsake the autoroute south of Chambéry and take the more northern N6, which winds south-west towards Grenoble, and travel through the small valleys, gorges and cols where the Granier mountain reaches the height of 1,938 metres and where monks made the famed liqueur, Grande-Chartreuse, from a distillation of herbs.

Chez Clotilde

Was There a Summer?

THE FIRST TIME my husband Michael and I met Clotilde was late one afternoon when we went to enquire about an evening meal. A stag's head hung over the door of the dining-room and against one wall stood an old pianola untouched, Clotilde told us later, since her father had last played it. In the darkening kitchen, moving heavily with a limp caused by arthritis and speaking in a slightly husky voice, as though her vocal chords had been smoked over juniper as constantly as the joints that hung around the chimney, Clotilde offered us small glasses of *marc* made from her apples. Having a few moments to herself, she responded to our questions: yes, she had always lived in this region; she remembered both her mother and grandmother sharing the cooking, depending on who had gone to market, who was turning the hay or plucking a fowl. A soup pot stood permanently on the range; in winter it was cabbage soup, well seasoned and with pieces of finely-chopped smoked bacon, to be eaten with chunks of *pain de campagne*, huge round boulders that last so well. And she remembers cleaning the crock, before brine was added, in which to preserve joints of meat, or salting a belly of pork for *petit salé*. In those days sugar was a luxury; they used instead their own honey for sweetening. And from an early age the children were taught which edible berries and wild herbs to bring to the kitchen.

We would have liked to linger, asking questions about her childhood, the restaurant and how she managed now as an old lady, but there always seemed to be someone delivering a basket of mushrooms, bags of groceries, paraffin, and something that looked very much like candles. They were. We learnt later how precarious the electricity was in a thunderstorm or if too great a load was put on the supply. When an old man arrived with a couple of dead hares in a sack and it was obvious some haggling was about to take place, we left. Clotilde's parting words to us were, 'You must come back. Come in three days! Then you shall taste my roast hare with beetroot.' Since those carefree days, strict laws now forbid this kind of hunting and barter. Even so a certain phlegmatic attitude means that victims of *la chasse* are still on the menu, even if this involves a few back-handers and surreptitious bargaining with those in uniform.

That was our first encounter with Chez Clotilde – an occasion to be followed by many others as we travelled through France on our way to Italy and Greece. Once, sitting on a bench in the pallid April sunlight when the snow still lay across the mountain peaks, and the stream

that flowed into the turbulent Cozon was the colour of milk, Clotilde spoke about herself. All around us, in spite of the annual slaughter that takes place throughout France of everything from a lark to a nightingale, birds sang with such spirited vitality we almost expected to see their notes penetrating the upper air. Wearing a purple woolly cap over her wispy grey hair and pausing for a while from her morning chores, Clotilde became quite garrulous as she related rambling stories of her family. I tried to unravel the legends. There was an Aunt Solange, who went to the bad; Uncle Prosper, who had made money from tinkering; cousin Crépin, who was a bit simple, and a whole galaxy of nephews and nieces with shining names such as Tatiana, Edwige, Sabine and Sylvestre (he must have become a forester, surely?) who had each, in one way or another, been affected by the existence of the restaurant, Chez Clotilde.

It has always been known as Chez Clotilde. Ask her, and she will tell you she never remembers a moment when the name was deliberately chosen. Rather it evolved. After she was widowed in her early twenties when her husband, Apollinaire, had been killed in a hunting accident, she started to serve meals as a means of augmenting her livelihood. Her parents had died in the war and Clotilde, now head of the family, had a brother, Gaspar, and two sisters, Angèle and Modeste, to support. I commented on the family's uncommon names. 'My *grand-maman* was most devout', she said touching a cross that hung on a chain round her neck. 'Ah, Honorine! She insisted on us all being named after our appropriate feast days.' She smiled and added, 'My parents could not possibly disobey!' She brought out old photographs of earlier years – dim, slightly out of focus and smelling of mould from the dresser drawer; it was possible to make out Clotilde as a dark-haired figure, strong and upright.

As a young widow, renowned for her generous cooking, it wasn't long before those in need of fortification on a cold day took to dropping in for a bowl of leek and potato soup as dense and rough as a blanket, or for a helping of savoury pigeon stew augmented with lumps of salted pork. Anyone and everyone – the travelling blacksmith, the schoolmaster, chimney-sweep, the curate or a carpenter; hunters, itinerant pedlars and, occasionally, a wandering functionary – all found their way to Clotilde's table, which at that time was a massive piece of wood eight inches deep and scoured from generations of jointing venison and wild boar. It stood in the centre of her kitchen. At one end was a range fired by wood, at the other a hearth where a black cauldron was suspended from a *crémaillère*, an iron arm, in which *lentilles au petit salé* could be left simmering for hours or where a tripod straddled the embers for grilled fish, joints of poultry and meat or sausages. The hiss of spitting fat falling onto logs filled the room and blue smoke lingered round the rafters.

The smell of good food travels as rapidly as gossip. Soon Clotilde needed a second long table; she set out a modest price list, and as her menus became extended, more members of her family were drawn in to help with the ducks, beehives, milking the ewes and goats, cheese making and seeing to the cellar – the light Apremont from the Alpine slopes of Chambéry or Chignin from vineyards south of Seyssel. Brother-in-law Patrice, a little erratic with his rod and gun, would dump fish or game on the kitchen table; other members of the family cut and split logs, slaughtered rabbits, poultry and pigs, dug the potager for turnips, carrots and a fleshier kind of sorrel which, along with the wild one, Clotilde used in dozens of traditional ways such as a tenderly green soup thickened with egg yolks. There were pumpkins, cauliflowers, celeriac and a

choice of potatoes, including *ratte* or *quenelles de Lyon*, so versatile that it's madness we don't grow them in Britain.

In the beginning nothing was written down, but any traveller could be sure by midday of finding an earthenware pot of *terrine de lapin* made from wild rabbit, nuts, fatty pork and a liberal dose of *eau-de-vie* on the table, or a plate of sliced ham and a tall jar alongside full of gherkins pickled with sprigs of thyme and a crumbling of bay leaves and always, ready to be put together on the instant, there was that once ubiquitous but delicious dish that alas is seldom found nowadays, *oeufs mayonnaise*. And when her brother Gaspar returned home after a successful fishing expedition, *truite au bleu* served with butter was on the menu; or better still, when there was a pike, with its long head and small scales lying at the bottom of his fishing basket, *quenelles de brochet* (which Clotilde always shaped by hand) drew to her table those enthusiasts for their delicacy of flavour. The *quenelles* were nothing like the tasteless lumps of fishy flour you get nowadays where the chef has been economical with the truth.

Gratin dauphinois, whenever we had it, was cooked in a shallow dish with such a crusty top it hid the sizzling and garlicky blend of potatoes and cream underneath. Radishes, peas, broad beans and salads were some of the vegetables that appeared in their seasonal order. Puréed spinach, bulked out with cream sauce, was often there in such large quantities that it was assumed everyone would help themselves to at least two servings as the huge white bowl was passed around the table.

It wasn't long, Clotilde explained as she peeled apples for *beignets de pommes*, before she added three more tables in an adjoining room to the kitchen and wrote out the daily menu on a slate; Sundays were a family occasion when wives and children joined in the serious eating, which lasted late into the afternoon. (As any traveller in France

knows, when they find a paucity of choice on the Sunday evening menu and the cook is looking frazzled, they can be sure the restaurant is a good one.)

Chez Clotilde has never become trendy. Nothing is likely to change while she is in charge. Despising a tendency for fast food and gadgets, she sticks to the traditions she learnt as a child. What is in season will appear on her table. Olives, anchovies (sold loose, not in tins), spices, capers, pulses, and so on are all available in local markets; but what makes Clotilde's restaurant stand way above many indifferent places you now find in France is that most of what you eat, if it doesn't come from her immediate locality, is either produced on her land, or gathered wild from the surrounding terrain. Her methods are slow and old-fashioned. She showed us a tinned copper *daubière* for braising beef in red-wine stock; a primitive iron *salamandre* with a long handle for heating on the fire before caramelizing sugar; there were various old *marmites, cocottes*, tureens and ramekins; smooth-handled kitchen knives, their blades thin as shavings, and a row of sieves hanging from the wall with their flimsy mesh worn to cobwebs.

THE LAST TIME WE WENT to Clotilde’s, turning up the narrow valley road, it was autumn. How the appetite quivers on the threshold of her kitchen. The distinct smell of good butter heating in a pan and of garlic roasting in the oven intermingled with the homely trace of damp ironing as Angèle hurriedly pressed the napkins before lunch, enveloped us in an atmosphere redolent of promises. The menu, as usual, was reassuringly short but even so choice was critical: chestnut soup or cheese soufflé concealing poached eggs; *andouillettes*, *écrevisses* cooked over the fire or roast lamb with juniper berries; *fromage de chèvre, St Marcellin* and *fromage de brebis* (made from ewe’s milk) followed by *tarte aux myrtilles*.

Against a background of bubbling and gurgling, of the scoop of ladle in a tureen, of murmuring from the kitchen and guttural sighs surrounding us, we spent three hours of contentment and indulgence. Not until our plates were pushed aside and half-empty glasses abandoned, did the thought of black coffee offer us the only hope of not succumbing to the soporific warmth and the comforting balm of a perfect meal.

But how much longer can this last? Will her restaurant be bought up, her reputation for good food adding noughts to the price as the place is pulled apart, to re-emerge with shiny brown and orange décor, plastic sconces and fake logs in the fireplace? Outside, in a gold frame, will an implausibly long menu only be changed when the paper starts to curl? Please not. Please don't let this happen. Let the door be locked, the sign taken down and the chalk of the last menu stealthily be blurred by dust. Better by far that the restaurant goes with her; that the cotton napkins grow mouldy in the dresser along with the photograph of Clotilde as a young woman. Let nothing remain except for a trace of green walnuts and outside, on summer evenings, a sweet scent of clover.

FOR YEARS IN FRANCE there used to be restaurants on the fringes of cities, in towns, or standing isolated in the countryside, where outside stood a wooden outline of a chef (or worse, a pig) with the day's menu pinned to his distended stomach. The more vehicles with French, not foreign, number plates parked outside, the more the traveller could depend on the meal being good. But no longer; for alas, a table ready laid with heavy cotton napkins, a carafe of wine, a basket of bread and the cruet, a massive contraption that included both olive oil and vinegar, has long ago left the small, lunchtime restaurants of France.

And so deprived I felt at this loss, so disheartened by the tendency for elaborate menus of obviously microwaved food, that when the artist Simon Dorrell suggested we search for the Clotildes and others of the culinary world to see if they still existed, I felt fired by enthusiasm to take on the quest. It turned out, at times, to be more uphill than I had expected, but like the months I spent a few years ago digging out material for my book *The Secret Gardens of*